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JOHN CALVIN IN AN AGE OF ECUMENISM: A SKETCH

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John Calvin has a justified reputation as an aggressive, divisive theologian, but in his own terms he was an ecumenist, doing more than anyone else to forge Reformed Protestantism into a single body (against Rome). This article considers some of the theological priorities around which he built that unity, but which appear unattractive to most modern Christians: in particular his views on predestination, idolatry and discipline. It suggests some of the reasons why these doctrines and practices might once have seemed compelling and asks what the modern Churches might have to learn from them.

It would be fair to say that John Calvin, the quincentenary of whose birth was being marked in 2009, is not a hero of modern ecumenism. Outside the dwindling number of Presbyterians and other old-school Protestants who defiantly embrace his legacy, his name has become an insult. In British popular culture, he surfaced most recently in Bill Duncan's grimly funny memoir-cum-quotation-book which presented the dour face of north-eastern Scotland to the outside world, and which he titled *The Wee Book of Calvin*. Within my own Anglican tradition—a tradition which has done its best to forget Calvin's role as one of its founding fathers—he is now normally reviled. The Anglican blogger who recently described him as the 'Dr Goebbels to Our Hitler in Heaven' is only a little more impolite than most of his co-religionists.[1] A few months ago I met an American Episcopalian, with whom I was discussing the reputation of a genuine monster of Anglican history, King Henry VIII. My dim view of the old tyrant quickly became clear (massive plunder, indiscriminating judicial murders, grotesque

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[1] <http://gallicananglican.blogspot.com/2009_09_01_archive.html> (accessed 17 November 2009).

theological egotism …). But, my friend replied (as if this excused everything), at least Henry VIII wrote a book against Calvin. In fact, Henry wrote against Luther (a man with much more blood on his hands than Calvin ever had), but apparently Anglican romanticism would prefer to redeem the old king's memory by setting him against the Protestant Reformation's most enduring theological bogeyman.

So it is partly that most Calvinist of qualities, sheer awkwardness, which makes me rally to his defence. For in truth, his detractors have some powerful points. He was, notoriously, implicated in and an apologist for a religious killing which outrages modern sensibilities and outraged a few (a very few) of his contemporaries, the execution of the Spanish anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus in 1553. Yes, virtually every other theologian in Europe either approved of or actively supported the execution, and the political case for killing Servetus was overwhelming; but one might have hoped that John Calvin, who had possibly the most brilliant mind of his age, would have risen above such concerns. And while that might be downplayed as an isolated incident in the life of a theologian whose politics were far more pacifist than most contemporaries liked, it is also true that Calvin was (to say the least) a difficult character. He was arrogant and argumentative; faults of which he himself was painfully aware, but which he could not shake off. He could not abide to be crossed when he believed he was right (which was virtually always). He could be vicious, especially to his friends. His chronic ill health left him chronically short-tempered. And some of the surviving portraits suggest that he really did look like a querulous goat.

And yet … modern ecumenism can do more with Calvin than treat him as an awful warning. This is partly because he was an ecumenist himself, in that most un-ecumenical age. As the most impressive of the quincentary biographies[1] makes clear, when Calvin was at the height of his powers in the 1540s and 1550s, he threw himself into the effort to bring the quarrelsome fragments of the Protestant Reformation together. He was not the first to attempt this. His mentor, the Strassburg reformer Martin Bucer, had laboured mightily for reconciliation not merely between Protestants, but across the hardening Protestant-Catholic divide. Bucer's style, and its limitations, are reminiscent of some twentieth-century ecumenical efforts: his approach was simply to keep talking, in the hope that forms of words

[1] Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

could be found which might either paper over the theological chasms between the parties, or bury them under an avalanche of unreadable prose. Calvin's approach was different, although he did share some of Bucer's wiliness. It was Calvin's statesmanship which was responsible for the only genuinely successful interconfessional agreement of the entire sixteenth century, the so-called *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, a carefully worded statement of Eucharistic theology which he agreed with the chief pastor of Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger. The *Consensus*' significance was not immediately apparent, as this was simply an agreement between one important Swiss church (Zurich) and one rather less important one (Geneva). Moreover, Calvin gave quite a lot more ground than Bullinger did. No matter: the *Consensus* provided a form of words which managed to neutralise the potentially toxic divisions over the Eucharist, and over the years that followed Reformed Protestants of all stripes used it to contain and manage those divisions. It did not end the theological arguments. What it did was to restore trust.

It also laid the groundwork for the much more ambitious programme on which Calvin embarked in the 1550s. Having pacified one side of the Protestant family, he was determined to bring the other side—Luther's followers—back to the table with the rest. Calvin was personally starstruck by Luther (twenty-five years his senior), treasured his memory after the older man's death in 1546, and longed for a reconciliation. But the sentiment was not reciprocated, and in the bitter internecine divisions that convulsed Lutheranism after Luther's death, reunion with Reformed Protestantism was the policy of the faction which eventually lost. To his credit, Calvin never quite understood the bile with which his overtures were rejected. In any event, he failed, and mainstream Protestantism remained split into two mutually antagonistic camps. Yet this campaign did help to bring all magisterial Protestants *except* the Lutherans under a single umbrella. Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to label that umbrella 'Calvinism'. Reformed Protestantism is a diverse tradition, with numerous founders—Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Oecolampadius. Yet Calvin, as well as being the most eloquent exponent of that tradition, did more than anyone else to forge its diversity into a workable unity. Attaching his name to it has a certain rough justice.

So, Calvin as ecumenical icon? Perhaps, but the purpose of his ecumenism is worth noticing. The reason he was so keen to bring

Protestantism together was to present a united front against the true enemy, namely Rome. That was also a major reason for his willingness to kill Servetus. Anti-Trinitarian radicals (whom Roman Catholics executed almost as a matter of routine, of course) threatened to discredit Calvin's more respectable Reformation by association. This was ecumenism as prioritisation: an insistence that minor disagreements could not be allowed to distract from the real battle. It may not seem attractive to modern sensibilities, but given Calvin's conviction that the papacy was Antichrist, it made perfect sense. And the phenomenon is hardly alien to modern ecumenism. No-one believes that it is a coincidence that western Christianity discovered its ecumenical vocation at the same time as it discovered the shared threat of secularism. One of the only demonstrably effective ways of stopping Christians from fighting one another is to present them with a common enemy.

* * *

But it is scarcely fair to Calvin to treat him simply as an exemplary, or cautionary, tale of the ecumenical enterprise. If his ecumenism had a distinctive flavour, it was in his refusal to compromise on doctrine or practice, and his insistence instead on forging unity around an overwhelming vision of Christ and building it on the common ground of Scripture. And it is precisely Calvin's doctrines and the practices he advocated which have left him in such bad odour amongst modern western Christians. Of all the Christian theologians who have advocated or participated in heresy executions, it is Calvin who is the most notorious: in part, I suspect, because it provides an easy pretext for dismissing his theology. Yet even those who have no intention of becoming Calvinists might benefit from a glance at some of Calvinism's distinctive theological concerns, and perhaps even from tasting the bitter, savoury morsels that it brings to the ecumenical feast. I propose to look at three concerns in particular: predestination, idolatry and the covenant.

Predestination is the doctrine which is most readily associated with Calvin, and it is a doctrine which has always aroused revulsion. It is this doctrine which led my Anglican blogger to label Calvin a Nazi, and to call his God 'a deity of well-nigh infinite sadism'. The problems with Calvin's doctrine of double predestination are almost too obvious to mention. Ethically, it appears to suggest both that God is the author of sin and that he created some humans (indeed, in the classic version,

most humans) with the specific purpose of consigning them to eternal torment. Pastorally, it tends to produce either despair, self-satisfaction or an unstable lurching from one to the other, fuelled by intense anxiety. Politically, it is the ideal tool for a self-serving elite which wishes to justify and perpetuate its privileges. Calvinism, of course, has answers to all those accusations, although not everyone will be convinced by them. But behind them lies a more serious problem: the doctrine is repugnant emotionally, and perhaps especially so to modern sensibilities. We appear instinctively to feel ourselves to be free and able to choose, even if it is difficult to make that concept make philosophical sense. It is sometimes suggested that we are predestined to believe in free will.

In which case, the obvious question is: why on earth would anyone formulate such a repellent and counterintuitive doctrine, and having done so, why would anyone else believe them? For the idea is a persistent one. Anyone who takes their Augustine seriously cannot avoid it. Luther (who has largely escaped blame on this front) was an avowed predestinarian, albeit his doctrine was not quite so crisp as Calvin's. But then, anyone who takes their Paul seriously cannot avoid it either. Christians whose gorge rises at the doctrine have to deal with Romans chapter 9, in which Paul uses the story of Jacob and Esau to argue that we are chosen before we are born, and in which he appears to teach that some people were created specifically in order to be damned. An Augustinian-Calvinist reading of this chapter is of course not the only one possible, but nor is it a difficult one. As well as scriptural evidence, the doctrine is powered by relentless logic, arguing from the sovereignty of God as well as following through the Protestant doctrine of justification.

Calvin's own view was that this doctrine was to be taught cautiously: he would never advocate concealing it (his reverence for truth and his loathing for clericalism made sure of that), but he was well aware of its pastoral dangers, and warned against 'penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. … We should not investigate what the Lord has left hidden in secret.' Such a course, he warned, leads the Christian to 'enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit."[1] His successors blithely ignored these warnings. Especially in the Netherlands and the

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 922-5.

English-speaking world, predestination became *the* signature doctrine of the Reformed churches in the seventeenth century, with all its implications lovingly teased out and with the most elaborate pastoral theologies constructed around it. This is often used to distance Calvin from the perceived excesses of later Calvinism, which is fair enough, but it can be read another way. For many Reformed Christians of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it appears that Calvin was wrong, and that the doctrine of predestination was not a labyrinth. Instead, improbably, it was a source of spiritual nourishment. That seems so unlikely to modern eyes that it is worth our looking at.

For the experience of thousands of early modern Christians was that the doctrine of predestination was profoundly attractive. This applied especially to those facing danger and persecution, a situation which many early Calvinists experienced and which their theology, for excellent Biblical and political reasons, suggested was normative for Christians. As the book of Revelation witnesses, one of the standard Christian responses to persecution and to worldly hardship is a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty. Those who might be daunted by the wrath of an earthly king can remember that there is a greater king, whose purposes will not be thwarted. And one of the key elements of the doctrine of predestination is the concept of the perseverance of the saints—the doctrine that the elect *cannot* lose their salvation under any circumstances, for God has decreed it from before all worlds. For those trembling as they face the prospect of imprisonment, torture or execution for their faith, this is a powerful comfort. Their faithfulness is not in their own weak hands; it is assured by God. Predestination may not be so attractive to armchair theologians, but there are no (well, fewer) freewillers in foxholes.

And indeed, even when Calvinism's initial crises had passed and it had become an establishment, the doctrine retained an appeal. This is partly because Calvinist societies retained an ongoing sense of crisis, a sense which, in the age of religious wars, was not imaginary. But the great achievement of Calvinist, or post-Calvinist, pastoral theology was to discover that the stark opposites of predestination could be turned into spiritually fruitful paradoxes. Recovering an almost Lutheran emphasis on the necessity of suffering—physical or spiritual—for the Christian life, the English Puritans took predestination's tendency to produce spiritual despair, and turned it into an advantage. As Richard Sibbes put it in his bestselling tract *The bruised reede, and smoaking*

flax, 'none are fitter for comfort than those that thinke themselves furthest off. ... A holy despaire in our selves is the ground of true hope.'[1]

The logical power, and problems, of predestination have not faded, but the sense of its pastoral appeal has: since the eighteenth century, it has found few friends. It is worth asking whether the modern Churches can learn anything from the comfort and power which the doctrine once offered.

* * *

Although Calvin has become inextricably associated with predestination, he would not have seen it as the heart of his theology. Closer to that heart was his concern—indeed, the wider Reformed Protestant concern—with the sin of idolatry.

It is scarcely possible to take the Scriptures as seriously as Reformed Protestants professed to and *not* be concerned with idolatry. At least, one might imagine so: but in fact, in the modern world, this perennial Christian concern has largely lapsed, and the ascetic caution about improper worship which once pervaded Protestantism has retreated to a few conservative redoubts. It is worth recalling the breadth of Calvinism's worries about idolatry. It was Reformed Protestantism which broke with the Latin West's tradition by renumbering the Ten Commandments so that the prohibition on idolatry once again became a commandment in its own right. Reading their Old Testaments, Reformed Protestants observed that almost the only criterion by which the worth of the rulers of ancient Israel was assessed was their willingness to destroy idols. They even noticed, in 2 Kings 18: 4, that King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze snake which God himself had commanded Moses to erect, on the grounds that it was being abused. If that could become an idol, then anything could.

Calvinists were well aware of the grounds on which western Christians had traditionally defended the use of images in worship. They understood that this was not idolatry in a crude sense; that no-one believed that a crucifix (for example) was literally a god, and that worshippers understood themselves to be worshipping God by means of such physical objects. But they saw this as irrelevant. The Deuteronomic prohibitions on inventing one's own form of worship were too sweeping for such special pleading. As a result, visual imagery,

[1] Richard Sibbes, *The bruised reede, and smoaking flax* (London: [M. Flesher] for R. Dawlman, 1631), 43.

and also music, was drastically curtailed and simplified. Calvinists were also well aware that idolatry is not committed by objects, but by people, and that the human heart is perfectly capable of creating idols within itself regardless of the physical props available. They found that the battle against external idols was a reminder of, and a preparation for, the greater, internal battle.

To modern eyes, this is a piety of vandalism. It was certainly responsible for a holocaust of medieval Christian artworks in a number of countries. But before we rush to deplore this, we should remember that it is truer to the original purpose of sacred art to destroy it as an idol than to put it in a museum because it is pretty. Compared to Calvinism, most other Christian traditions are open to the accusation of not taking seriously the very widespread Scriptural prohibitions on idolatry. If we do not wish to honour those prohibitions as Calvinism has done, it behoves us to consider how we *do* wish to honour them.

* * *

Our third topic, covenant, brings us to the heart of the Calvinist conception of the Church: which is as a covenanted community, a new Israel, a consecrated people with all the privileges and responsibilities which that implies. This is a rich and troublesome theological theme, but one of the ways in which Calvin developed it, is particularly troubling to modern sensibilities, and perhaps especially so in my own Anglican tradition. This is his emphasis on the role of collective discipline in church life.

Once again, this is a practice founded on a strong Scriptural base, in this case a direct set of New Testament examples (chiefly Matthew 18: 15-17, and numerous Pauline passages such as Titus 3: 10-11). Calvin's mentor Martin Bucer introduced him to the idea that the Church is responsible for overseeing the morals of its members, an idea which Calvin implemented rigorously in Geneva, and which later Calvinists in Scotland and the Netherlands elevated into being an indispensable mark of a true Church. Because this is Calvinism, the principle is shot through with a radical egalitarianism: discipline is enforced by clergy and laity alike, and Calvin and others strove to maintain the principle that discipline was indifferent to wealth, rank, status or gender.

To modern, liberal instincts, this is perhaps Calvinism's least attractive feature. Calvinist discipline can look like totalitarianism in the bud. Its insistence that we are all our brothers' keepers is a snooper's charter. The concentration on avoiding scandal is almost an

open invitation to hypocrisy. Privacy, diversity and the individual conscience are all subordinated to a grimly conformist authoritarianism.

Again, since its flaws are so obvious, it is worth pausing to note its more positive dimension. The purpose of Calvinist discipline—in intention, and to an impressive degree in execution—was not punitive, but pastoral and reformatory. Although Calvinist consistories and kirk sessions did function remarkably like courts, they were not in the business of punishing crime, but of bringing sinners to repentance. The penalties they imposed were aimed at demonstrating that repentance, or at excluding the impenitent from the community (although these penalties could certainly sting just as much as any secular punishment). The historical study of Calvinist discipline in recent decades has established how painstakingly pastoral it habitually was.[1] The elders of Calvinist churches spent long hours resolving quarrels between neighbours, or patching up marital arguments (and, in cases of domestic violence, ordering separations and sometimes permitting divorce and remarriage). The ambition that the ministers and elders themselves should be judged by the same high standards was fulfilled impressively often, and there were even earnest and sometimes successful attempts to impose those standards on the nobility and gentry.

Of course, Calvinist discipline was intended as a prototype neither of the totalitarian state nor of the welfare state. Its purpose was not primarily to control or to assist the people, but to consecrate them, and to ensure that the people as a group were holy. Leaving morals to the consciences of individual believers, in the modern fashion, was an abdication of ministers' responsibility for their flocks, and of all Christians' responsibility for one another. This set of ambitions was not, of course, universally popular. Many of those hauled before consistories accepted their faults and were duly penitent, and many more found it prudent to pretend to be so; but others denied their guilt, disputed the consistories' expansive definition of sin or rejected the moral majority's authority. But it is worth emphasising that establishing and maintaining discipline of this kind was only possible on the basis of consent. Most Reformed Christians were persuaded of its legitimacy

[1] This is ably summarised in Graeme Murdock, *Beyond Calvin: the Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe's Reformed Churches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

and its value. There is good evidence that these systems won more than compliance; they won respect. The moral seriousness which they conveyed was attractive; not least because being in good standing with a consistory suddenly became a powerful testimony to one's own moral status.

Needless to say, it would be impossible to impose a classic Calvinist system of discipline on any modern community, even if a church could be found which was deranged enough to want to attempt it. Yet there may have been a baby worth keeping somewhere in that murky and unlamented bathwater. There are good grounds for thinking that there is a Christian responsibility to care for one another's morals, to function as an ethical community rather than as atomised individuals, and to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. There are even grounds for thinking that that might entail drawing boundaries to the community on some occasions. The classical Calvinist means of fulfilling these responsibilities are clearly not workable now, if indeed they ever truly were. In which case, what other means are we going to adopt?

* * *

I should make my own position clear: I am not a Calvinist in any precise sense, merely a normally muddled Anglican who sometimes feels the tug of Calvinist logic. I belong to the tradition which (in the words of those subtle historical commentators W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman) sees Calvinism as 'right but repulsive':[1] strong meat, the dry prose of theology. But I do suspect it brings an undervalued set of gifts to the modern Churches: mulish determination, a stubborn willingness to follow uncomfortable trains of thought to the end and to ask spiky and awkward questions to which there are not comfortable or obvious answers. Few of us now, perhaps, would agree with Calvin's answers to those questions. But he deserves a hearing: not simply because his answers are sometimes more compelling than we give them credit for, but because unlike most of us, he had the nerve and clear-sightedness to raise the questions in the first place.

[1] W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and all that* (London, 1930), chapter 35.